Remarks as delivered by DNI Clapper at the Ethos and Profession of Intelligence

Remarks as delivered by
The Honorable James R. Clapper
Director of National Intelligence

The Ethos and Profession of Intelligence

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Thanks, for the wonderful introduction. I appreciate that. I want to give a shout-out to Chris Kojm, who's here as the visiting professor of international affairs at the Elliott School. Chris served with great distinction as chairman of our National Intelligence Council.

This morning, CIA Director John Brennan, my colleague and close friend, kicked things off with a discussion of what "The Ethos and Profession of Intelligence" means to him and to his Agency. That included a look at how the CIA is adapting to the changing world we live in.

The CIA's modernization effort that John talked about, integrating disciplines and capabilities across the Central Intelligence Agency, will make it more agile and more responsive to world events and to our customers' needs, and to what I've called, "the most diverse threats I've seen in my 52-years-or-so in the intelligence business," in one capacity or another.

I think a lot of what gets lost in the public debate about how we conduct intelligence is why we even do intelligence at all. Why does any nation-state conduct intelligence? We do, mainly, I think at its most basic level, to reduce uncertainty for our decision makers. That can be anyone from the President, to an ambassador, to a platoon commander deployed to a war zone.

We can't eliminate uncertainty for them, but we can provide insight and analysis to help their

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understanding and to make uncertainty at least manageable, so that our national-security decision makers can make educated decisions with an understanding of the risk involved, as well as what we don't know but can assess. And that ultimately helps to keep our nation safe and secure.

We as an Intelligence Community, as an enterprise, try to do all of this while protecting our values as Americans. Despite what some assert, intelligence is an honorable profession, and our work is based on values and principles that we respect and very try hard to adhere to.

It's also a challenging profession, one in which we can make mistakes, which we report and ensure we're held accountable for. And we constantly work to get better, to be more precise and be more responsive to our customers, including "Intelligence Customer Number One," the President.

These improvements at the CIA will make the entire Intelligence Community better. So, my thanks to John, for his superb leadership at CIA, for his friendship, and for inviting me here to speak to you this afternoon. I appreciate John's blind trust, because it's a little risky to ask the Intelligence Community's oldest geezer [laughter], to ruminate on the ethos of intelligence [laughter], especially right after lunch. [laughter]

I've been around a while, although I was not, as has been rumored, an original member of the Culper Ring of spies under General George Washington. [laughter]. That was a little before my time, 1778 to be exact, and I first joined the Intelligence Community in 1963.

In 1965 I was one of the first 100 Air Force intelligence officers to go to Vietnam on "permanent change of station" orders, and my personal insight into the ethos and profession of intelligence goes back even farther than that. My dad was a signals intelligence officer in the Second World War, intercepting and deriving useful intelligence from German and Japanese communications.

He decided to make the Army a career, and as a result of traveling the globe with him after the war , I grew up on intelligence sites and, specifically, antenna farms all over the world. Some of my earliest memories are of living in Eritrea, on the Horn of Africa in 1946, and in Japan during the Korean War.

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We spent some time at Vint Hills Farm Station in Northern Virginia, in Warrenton, in the late ‘40s. That’s where I first met my wife, Sue, whose dad was also in the Signals Intelligence business. I was eight. She was five. Nowadays, after 50 years of marriage, that age difference doesn’t seem like quite as big of a deal as it did when we first met [laughter], but she never misses a chance to remind me, even today, that I’m a cradle robber. [laughter]

My early experiences with my dad got me interested in the intelligence profession. Then in 1953 when I was 12 years old, while my parents were moving between duty stations, they left me with my grandparents, who were in Philadelphia, for the summer.

This was way before the days of wifi and Netflix, back when there were only three TV stations to watch, and of course they were all black and white. My grandparents, as all grandparents are wont to do, let me stay up as late as I wanted.

One night, I was watching movies, and I was turning the big dial on the TV, (This is before remotes, you understand. You actually had to go up to the television and turn the dial.) [laughter], and I stopped halfway between channels four and five, because I heard people talking.

After a couple minutes of listening to this, I realized it was the Philadelphia police department dispatcher. So I stuck a toothpick into the dial to hold it between the channels [laughter], and I just listened in. [laughter]

That’s right. I hacked my grandparents’ analog TV set [laughter], with a toothpick. [laughter and applause]

The next day, I got a map out, the city map of Philadelphia, and as the dispatcher sent police units to different addresses in the city, I’d look them up. I got interested in just how specific responses went to specific locations for specific calls, and how all that worked.

Then I started sleeping all day and staying up all night doing this, [laughter],

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And after a while, I figured out the call signs of all the different precincts. I mapped out the police districts, based on the communications pattern and who took which calls, and I figured out who the senior officers were, based on their personal call signs. After a few weeks, I had a pretty good working knowledge of the Philadelphia police department and how it was organized and operated. I had my map of the city and a card file, stuffed with information.

So, at the end of the summer, when my dad came to pick me up to take us to our new home, and he asked what I'd been doing all summer, I showed him my map and my card file, my "data base" we'd call it today, and I explained how I'd come up with all this information on the Philly Police Department by just listening to and analyzing the department's communications.

My dad was dumbstruck. He shook his head and said, "I guess I can retire. I've raised my own replacement." [laughter and applause]

The point, of course, is that what I did as an avocation as a 12-year-old kid, quite accidentally, illustrates the essence of how we often conduct intelligence, then and now. Our work boils down to a lot of research, determination, continuity, drawing inferences, and taking advantage of any insecurities the target may have.

That was 62 years ago. Ten years after that, I joined the intelligence profession as a SIGINT officer, and about three years later, I had the unusual experience of serving with, and rooming with, my Dad in Vietnam. We had a seven month overlap in our tours. I'll save that story for when I've got a few hours to talk.

A lot has changed since then. Today, because of the internet, it's a whole lot easier for 12-year-old kids to find entertainment. Of course, the internet also changed the fundamentals of intelligence work. During the heyday of the Cold War – the '50s through the '80s, which I lived through – there were essentially two large, mutually-exclusive communications networks. One was dominated by the U.S. and our Allies, and the other was dominated by the Soviet Union and theirs. So, if we were listening to someone on the Soviet network, we could be reasonably sure, almost 100-percent sure, that person was not a U.S. citizen.

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Today, the internet and telecommunications networks are all interconnected and global. Our task, as the Intelligence Community, is to find the bad actors, to distinguish a terrorist sending directions on how to build a bomb or how to defeat TSA procedures, from cyber criminals and cyber spies, and from someone sending their grandkid a recipe for apple pie, all intermixed on the same network. So we're not just looking for a needle in a haystack. We're looking for thousands of needles scattered over acres and acres of haystacks. And because our world is connected by cyberspace, the work of our human intelligence officers at CIA and of anyone who needs to maintain a cover, is also much more difficult.

We also have to continue to live up to the ethical standards I learned from my Dad, principles I've seen us uphold through my 50-plus years in the intelligence profession, including privacy and civil liberties. That brings me to a project we started four years ago, and publicly rolled out last year. That's the formalized "Principles of Professional Ethics for the IC."

I had, for a while, wanted to articulate in one place the fundamental ethical principles that unite us as an Intelligence Community and distinguish us as a profession; something that would help forge a unified Intelligence Community identity, encompassing the personal, organizational, and corporate standards of behavior that are expected of us as intelligence professionals. And as I said, some of this was inspired by things my Dad taught me, although he would never be so pretentious as to call them a "Code of Ethics"

So in February of 2012, I asked our civil liberties protection officer to lead a cross-community team in preparing a professional code of ethics for intelligence professionals. Over time, we built a consensus across the Intelligence Community. And in September of 2012, three years ago, we published the "Principles of Professional Ethics for the Intelligence Community." I want to go briefly through those seven principles, because I believe they are at the foundation of the ethos of intelligence.

The first says, "We serve the American people, and understand that our mission requires selfless dedication to the security of our nation." The men and women of the IC live this principle every day. Over the past half-century, I've seen incredibly selfless acts, including men and women who have made the ultimate sacrifice as members of the Intelligence Community.

The second principle says, "We seek the truth; speak truth to power; and obtain, analyze, and

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provide intelligence objectively." Over the past three or four years, we in the IC have had way too many opportunities to give bad news to those in power, and we have not shied away from the truth.

The third principle says, "We support and defend the Constitution, and comply with the laws of the United States." Over the past few years, the theft and release of NSA documents has cost us sources and methods we're not going to get back. Yet to me, even more disturbing is that many Americans now question their Intelligence Community's commitment to lawfulness and to privacy and civil liberties.

We, all of us in the Intelligence Community, whether in uniforms or suits, take oaths to support and defend the Constitution, against all enemies, foreign and domestic. And, I would assert, we spend more time and energy focused on understanding the laws and directives that govern our work than maybe any other sector of government. That's actually been true for a long time.

The facts of the past decade show that, while we have made mistakes, to be clear, the Intelligence Community never willfully violates the law. That relates directly to our fourth principle: "We demonstrate integrity in our conduct, mindful that all our actions, whether public or not, should reflect positively on the Intelligence Community at large."

Our fifth principle says, "We are responsible stewards of the public trust." Usually with stewardship, people talk about resources and money. When I think about stewardship, I first think about being a good steward of our most valuable asset, which is our people. Training and especially mentoring the people who will carry on the work of intelligence and intelligence integration in the next few decades has become an especially big deal to me, because – as Sue has made clear – I'm not going to be in this job for more than another, 450 days – but who's counting?

So of course, training and mentoring leads to our sixth principle: "Excellence." Intelligence integration, which has been my mantra as DNI, means bringing together the excellence in tradecraft from each of the components of the Intelligence Community, understanding and capitalizing on each other's strengths, and tackling intelligence problems as a community from the start.

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That's true at the agency level and for members of our workforce too. So from both and institutional and personal standpoint, integration is about getting the best out of our diverse viewpoints and experiences by celebrating our differences and bringing them together. So our seventh and final IC principle of professional ethics says, "We embrace the diversity of our nation, promote diversity and inclusion in our workforce, and encourage diversity in our thinking."

Each of these seven principles, which I've been talking about publicly for a little more than a year, has been a part of the Intelligence Community I've known for better than 50 years.

Today, I want to add a related but different set of principles we follow, which reflect an aspect of the intelligence business that has fundamentally changed in the past decade. These are the "Principles of Intelligence Transparency"

When I was a kid, I never talked about what my dad did for the government, and then when I first got my clearance in the '60s we never, ever talked about signals intelligence. Today, the American public expects us to talk about what we're doing and how we're using the power of U.S. intelligence responsibly. And the American people have shown, they'll discuss our work whether we participate in the conversation or not.

So one of my major takeaways the past few years has been that; yes, we have to protect, and will protect, our secrets: our sources and methods, our tradecraft; but we have to be more transparent about the things we can talk about.

Last month, the Intelligence Community made history when John and I participated in an unprecedented event, in Austin, Texas, at Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, when CIA rolled out 2,500 declassified President's Daily Briefings from President Johnson's administration and from President Kennedy's.

As many of you know, the PDB is the apex of intelligence reporting and has been since 1961. It represents the record of the Intelligence Community's daily dialogue with the President to address global challenges and opportunities related to national security. It's among the most highly classified and sensitive documents in all of government.

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I think a lot of students and faculty here at George Washington University would also find those documents interesting and enlightening, and I hope that they help people understand our work at its highest level and highest classification. That's why we declassified and released them.

It took us a few years to get that done, but now that we've set the precedent, we're going to continue declassification with subsequent administrations. I don't think any other nation on the planet would look back open and expose intelligence work of that significance. As John said in September, in Austin, "The release of these documents affirms that the world's greatest democracy doesn't keep secrets merely for secrets sake. Whenever we can shed light on the work of our government, without harming national security, we'll do so."

That's true with those historical documents, and it's true with discussions of things we're doing now. More-and-more, we're having public conversations about our work, to correct misunderstandings and try to help people grasp what we do and how and why we do it, to show that we are in fact worthy of America's trust, and to prove that we make essential contributions to the security of Americans and our friends and allies around the world.

It's why, over the past two years, the Community has declassified thousands of documents about our work, and importantly, about the oversight of our work conducted by all three branches of government.

By publishing those declassified documents on our Tumblr site, called "IC on the Record," and pushing them out on Facebook and Twitter, they've reached millions of people in the U.S. and around the world.

That includes, of course, our adversaries, who have learned a lot from our transparency. But in the end, we believe this transparency is worth the cost, because if the American people don't understand what we are doing, why it's important and how we're protecting their civil liberties and privacy, we will lose their confidence, and that will affect our ability to perform our mission, which ultimately serves them.

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The President challenged us, in a speech in January of last year, to formalize privacy protections for our signals intelligence efforts, both at home and abroad, and to be more transparent about how we implement those protections. This past January, we published a comprehensive report answering the challenges the President publicly gave us in 2014. We also supported the USA Freedom Act, which authorizes increased reporting of how the Intelligence Community exercises some of its authorities.

This past February, we as an intelligence community published four “Principles of Intelligence Transparency.” I want to talk about those four transparency principles for a moment. They’re pretty simple.

- One: provide appropriate transparency to enhance public understanding of the IC. That principle talks about who we are, what we do, and the authorities under which we work.
- Two: be proactive and clear in making information publicly available, when we can. That gets into how we should be transparent.
- Three: protect information about intelligence sources, methods, and activities.
- And four: align Intelligence Community roles, resources, processes, and policies to support transparency implementation.

Tenets three and four essentially say that protecting our tradecraft: our sources, methods, and activities, is an individual responsibility for each person who holds a security clearance; while transparency is an institutional responsibility for the Intelligence Community as an enterprise.

If a member of the Intelligence Community, whether government or contractor, comes across information she thinks should be made public, we have processes in place already to review it for declassification. And if someone comes across something she thinks we’re doing wrong, we have lots of avenues to report that activity, including legitimate avenues for whistle blowing. To make sure our workforce knows their rights and responsibilities on these issues, we’ll continue to train and share information on how to recommend something for declassification, how to properly blow a whistle, and what an employees’ protections are if they elect do so.

We’re also increasingly reaching out to the American public. Just having principles and publishing the principles isn’t enough. So we stood up an Intelligence Community Transparency Working Group, with senior representatives from all components of the

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Intelligence Community.

I've been meeting with these great people as they came up with an "implementation plan" to transform those principles into action. They felt, and I agreed, that it would be appropriate and consistent with our goals to publish that implementation plan.

So today my office is publishing the transparency principles and the implementation plan on our public website, dni.gov, and pushing it out on Facebook and Twitter. And sometime in the next few weeks, I'm planning to do a live chat on Tumblr. That was one of the specific ideas that came out of the working group. Actually, it came from Michael Thomas, on my staff, who's a 1998 graduate of the Elliott School here at George Washington.

Looking back, I think Air Force 2nd Lt. Jim Clapper, from 1963, would be shocked and maybe a little horrified at the idea of doing a live web chat on intelligence work. I have to confess that, because of my experience growing up in the SIGINT business and my five decades of intelligence work, the kind of transparency we're engaged in now felt almost "genetically antithetical" to me, at least for the first couple of years, but it doesn't really feel that way anymore. The IC is adapting to our world, including even the geezer up here.

I said that the internet has made our work more difficult. That's true, but it also has given us more opportunities. We definitely have more opportunities to intercept communications, that is, SIGINT work, and to make contacts and work with people who have key insights into our adversaries, meaning HUMINT. We also have more opportunities when it comes to being transparent. We're reaching out with social media, and we're using that avenue to try to connect with the U.S. public and with future intelligence officers.

On that note, I want to talk for a minute to students here, whether you attend George Washington or not. The past few years, I've spent a lot of time engaging young people who are coming out of college who want to join or are thinking about joining the Intelligence Community. I'm hoping the fact that you're here today means that you're at least thinking about a career in the Intelligence Community.

Here's the advice I give to young people who are interested. First, don't get myopic. Don't just target: "I want to join Agency X." You should apply to all of them. There's challenging and

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interesting work to do everywhere in the Intelligence Community. So advice point one is: apply everywhere. Point two is this: be patient and persevere. Our federal budget and the trajectory it's headed make this a tough job market, but we need you. We really do. We need math geniuses and policy gurus. We need analysts and we need IT experts.

Today, I we have with us a recent George Washington grad from my office. Amy Norton is a 2010 graduate of the Elliott School, and now, she's an analyst with the National Counterterrorism Center. Amy, I can't see anything out there, because of these lights, but I hope you're out there. Please stand up. [applause]

Amy and I were talking this morning, and she told me the message she'd give GW students is, if you want a career that affects our nation and our national security at the highest levels, you couldn't do better than the IC. So, that's my pitch, endorsed by Amy: We could really use your help, and your work will matter.

Thanks very much for listening, and thank you all for the work you do and the work you'll continue to do for our nation.